

Race to the Top

Instructions for Writing Comments

Purposes and Audiences

- The primary audience for your comments is the U.S. Department of Education. Your comments must provide clear and objective justifications for your scores by pointing to specific evidence in the application and providing a rationale for the number of points you awarded.
- In addition, your comments will be reviewed by States that may be applying for Phase 2 of the competition – both to get concrete feedback on their own applications prior to submission or resubmission, as well as to understand what “strong” proposals look like by reviewing other States’ applications and associated comments.
- Finally, the public is also an audience for your comments; all applications, together with associated scores and comments, will be posted on the Department’s website at the conclusion of each phase of the competition. We expect that these will be scrutinized carefully by the media and by interested parties.

Getting Started

- Before you begin reading, make sure you have the applications that were assigned to you.
- Double check to be sure you do not have a conflict of interest with any of the applications. If you become aware of a potential conflict of interest (either real or perceived) with an application, notify the panel monitor and/or competition manager immediately of this conflict.

Content

- Be specific. General statements such as “this is a good professional development plan” are not helpful.
- Explain in detail why you reached the conclusions you did.
- Point to specific information in the application that helped you reach your conclusion.
- Evaluate what the application says; do not simply restate what the applicant has written.
- If information is missing from the application, clearly indicate this in your comments.
- Remember that your comments should reflect your best judgment based on the information that the applicant has presented.

Style

- Use complete sentences with proper grammar and spelling.
- Use simple, declarative sentences whenever possible. There’s nothing wrong with starting sentences with “The applicant...” five or six times in a row.
- Be professional, tactful, and constructive.
- Use statements, not questions. For example, rather than “Will the team be made up of teachers or counselors?” say “It is unclear from the application whether the team will be made up of teachers or counselors.”
- Try not to use statements like “I feel,” “I think,” “the applicant should,” or other words that will infer personal bias.
- We recommend against including page numbers in your comments.

Additional Recommendations

- Take notes (either on the application itself or on separate note pages) so that you can locate the information you need for the panel discussion.
- Strategy to consider: Write your comments in a Microsoft Word document rather than working directly in the application review system. This way you can use the Word spelling and grammar

check features and then copy and paste your work directly into the system. This will also provide a back-up file in the event that the Application Review System times out before you save. The system will time-out after an hour of inactivity.

- Keep in mind the following benchmarks for submitting your comments:

January 2010						
SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
17	18	19	20	21	22	23 Initial Reviewer Training
24	25	26	27	28 Application #1 Scores and Comments Entered	29	30 Application #2 Scores and Comments Entered

February 2010						
SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	1	2 Application #3 Scores and Comments Entered	3	4	5 Application #4 Scores and Comments Entered	6
7	8 Application #5 Scores and Comments Entered ALL SCORES AND COMMENTS DUE	9 APPLICATION PACKAGE MAILED TO DC <i>Panel Monitors Review Comments and Scores in ARS</i>	10 <i>Panel Monitors Review Comments and Scores in ARS</i>	11 <i>Panel Monitors Review Comments and Scores in ARS</i>	12 <i>Panel Monitors Review Comments and Scores in ARS</i>	13
14	15 PRESIDENT'S DAY *Reviewers Travel	16 ON-SITE – Tier 1	17 ON-SITE – Tier 1	18 ON-SITE – Tier 1	19 ON-SITE – Tier 1 3pm – Reviewers Released	20

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to send them to racetothetopreview@ed.gov or call Jessica Clark at [REDACTED]

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Instructions for Scoring Applications

You will assign a numerical score for an applicant's response to selection criteria, as indicated on the scoring sheet.

General Guidelines

- Review and score each application independently. You must base your scores entirely on the published criteria and rubric.
- Be sure your scores are consistent with your comments.
- Your comments indicate the extent to which the applicant's response to a criterion is of high, medium or low quality; your scores quantify the evaluation.
- You must attend and participate in all panel discussions.
- You may change scores and comments after an on-site panel discussion, if you so choose; however, you are not required to make changes. Since your score must be consistent with your comments, please ensure that any changes are appropriately updated in your comments.

Specific Guidelines

- Keep in mind that the number of points varies by criterion.
- Use the full range of points for each criterion. It is perfectly acceptable to assign all the possible points for a criterion, or to assign 0 points, as long as these extremes are sufficiently supported in reviewers' comments.
- Look for and use information in all sections of the application, including budgets and referenced appendices.
- Consistency in rating all of the applications should be the guiding rule.
- Consider only the information in the application when assigning points. Do not consider information about the applicant that cannot be found in the application. Do not do independent research regarding the applicant or the application.

Suggested Strategies

- Consider writing comments before you assign a score. It is common to mentally arrive at a ballpark score on a particular criterion after an initial read, but sometimes the act of writing comments—and identifying the extent to which the application meets the selection criterion—can alter that score.
- When scoring a criterion, start from zero points and build up from there. Re-read your comments for indications that the applicant has addressed the criterion fully and with high quality. Refer to the scoring rubric to assign points as you build your final score. Using a model where points are added up from zero, rather than deducted from the maximum allowable, will help to ensure that panel members use a similar strategy when scoring applications.

Examples of Written Reviewer Comments from Other Programs

The following statements illustrate the types of comments that might be written in response to the information an application provides for some of the selection criteria. For each example, a comment that provides some information is presented, followed by a discussion of why the comment is unsatisfactory, which, in turn, is followed by a more informative version of the comment.

Example #1

Not useful: The applicant demonstrates a pervasive need for access to AP incentive programs for low-income students.

Discussion: The comment is too general and does not provide sufficient details to substantiate the conclusion.

Useful: The applicant demonstrates a pervasive need for access to AP incentive programs for low-income students. Of the two high schools included in the grant, one offers no AP courses, and one offers only AP English Language and Composition, AP U.S. History (which is offered through distance learning), and AP Spanish Language. During the last school year, low-income student participation was limited to the AP Spanish course. Only 20 percent of the low-income students who took the AP Spanish exam scored 3 or better.

Example #2

Not useful: The project director will spend 10 percent of her time on the project. Teachers will serve as school-based coordinators and spend 50 percent of their time on the project.

Discussion: The comment is ambiguous and non-evaluative. It is unclear whether this is a strength, or how this information relates to the selection criterion.

Useful: The project director will spend 10 percent of her time on the project. This is appropriate and adequate given the limited extent of her responsibilities in the management plan. Most of the project activities will be led and coordinated at the school building level by master teachers who will spend 50 percent of their time on the project. This time commitment is appropriate given the extensive array of activities they will be responsible for carrying out under the management plan.

Example #3

Not useful: The applicant's plan for professional development will not be effective.

Discussion: The comment does not explain the basis for the reviewer's conclusion.

Useful: The applicant's plan for professional development will not be effective in improving teachers' content knowledge and effectiveness in the classroom. Professional development in the content areas is limited primarily to half-day College Board workshops that will be offered to the school's AP teachers. Over the course of the grant, each AP teacher also may attend one professional development conference of his or her choosing, which "may include" the AP annual conference or the ASCD conference. This is neither coherent nor sustained training in the field. There is no professional development in the content areas for other English, math, or science teachers who do not teach AP courses, but who are important parts of the vertical teams. The most intensive professional development will be three-day summer workshops on the culture of poverty (year 1), Covey's "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" (year 2), and the use of technology in the classroom (year 3). While these sessions may be helpful to teachers, they must be supplemented by the intensive, sustained, content-based professional development that is essential to improving classroom instruction—and that is largely absent from this application.

Example #4

Not useful: The applicant does not adequately address the critical foreign languages priority.

Discussion: The comment is vague and does not explain why the reviewer believes the applicant did not adequately address the priority.

Useful: The applicant does not effectively address the critical foreign languages priority because its response is limited to a statement that one of its schools will offer an online AP Chinese Language and Culture course. The provider of the course is not identified and no information is provided about the effectiveness of the course (e.g., how did students who took the course at other schools fare on the exam?). More importantly, it does not describe how it will prepare students to develop the Chinese language proficiency needed to succeed in this course. There is no indication in the application that Chinese language courses are or will be offered in lower grade levels. Without this well-articulated pipeline of instruction, few, if any, high school students will enroll in this online course, much less succeed on the AP Chinese Language and Culture exam.

Example #5

Not Useful: The applicant does not adequately address the adequacy of resources criteria.

Discussion: The comment is vague and does not explain why the reviewer believes the applicant did not adequately address the criteria.

Useful: The applicant does not effectively address the adequacy of resources because its response is limited to a statement that it will "provide the facility, resources, and required local cost share," but does not identify the resources it will provide, the source of those resources, or how these resources are adequate for the proposed project and ensures that the local cost share requirement is met. The applicant does not provide information about the facilities that will be used for the project, and does not identify what type of facility will be used, where it is located, or who owns the facility. The applicant does not identify how much local cost share it will provide to the total cost of the program, or exactly what resources it will use towards the cost share. In order for the applicant to effectively address this criteria, the applicant must provide a clear and detailed description of the support, resources, facilities, and equipment that it will provide directly or through partnerships or community collaboration and what resources, whether cash or in-kind contributions, will be used towards the local cost share. In addition, the applicant must provide an estimate of the total cost of program (that includes the Federal and local cost shares) and how the local resources provided will be adequate for local cost share of the proposed project.